



LUNDI MATIN 2019-11-28

HONG KONG: WATER, FIRE AND THE WIND – THE BATTLE FOR #POLYU

DOCUMENTATION

The following report on the siege and battle of the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong, written by the "Cafardnaüm Collective", describes the events of November 14-19, 2019 and is as impressive as it is poetic, testifying to the ingenuity and determination of the occupiers. In other words, it may do justice to the dimensions of the event. A German version appeared on Non Copy Riot, from which this analogous translation was made.

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Sunday, November 17th, ten o'clock. The strategy of "liquid terror" has returned to Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The insurgents are afraid of the cannon of the water cannon from France. Literally. The blue, pepper-saturated liquid it generously sprays causes unbearable burns. This morning, two vehicles, accompanied by armored vehicles, tried to break through the occupying forces' lines of defense. Without reckoning with the magic of the fire. But then the wind turned. Back to the beginnings...

When in June 2019 a draft law on the possibility of extradition to the Chinese mainland (ELAB) triggered the current fire, Hong Kong already had a lot of experience in occupations. The Umbrella Uprising of 2014 not only left its mark on people's minds, but also led to the emergence of a new generation of "localist" activists who defended Hong Kong's political and cultural autonomy. A movement whose most important figure is the young Edward Leung, imprisoned since 2018, who is also regarded as the spiritual father of the current uprising.

The 2014 Civil Disobedience Campaign also generated new protest practices, including the blockade of streets and the organization of 'alternative lifestyles' in the heart of the city. For 79 days, the business districts of Admiralty and Causeway Bay, as well as popular neighborhoods like Mong Kok on the other side of Victoria Harbor, were the scene of massive occupations.

Around these temporary camps, cities in the middle of the big city were improvised, with their debate and training spaces, their pharmacies, their exhibition sites...

These occupations, which take place within the framework of the DIY event, are nevertheless very well thought out. This surprising combination of discipline and wild DIY finds its way into the occupations in autumn 2019. With one (remarkable) difference: Considering the fact that this peaceful mobilization was not able to successfully implement its demands for electoral reforms, a part of the pro-democracy movement has now focused on more militant forms of action.

Although the occupation of the PolyU is part of this protest movement, it is also the result of an immediate economic situation. On November 8, 2019, a student of Tseung Kwan O University of Science and Technology, Chow Tsz-lok, died as a result of a panic move of escape triggered by a police action against a rally.

The Anti-ELAB movement already has several "martyrs", starting with Marco Leung Ling-Kit, whose suicide in June 2019 was in many ways a founding event for this new cycle of protests. For the activists and supporters of the movement, however, the death of Chow Tsz-lok has a different meaning compared to these political suicides: they accuse the police of being the cause of the fall (from a parking deck) that after a week of agony in an intensive care unit, in which the whole city holds its breath, eventually cost the student his life. When the news of his death finally spread and made the young man the first identified victim of the police – unlike the suspected missing persons (1) – the city caught fire.

On November 11, a call for a general strike was launched on Telegram channels and the LIHKG Forum, which were popular with activists and supporters of the movement. As L., a former sympathizer, remembers:

"It was crazy, people tried to go out at 5:30 in the morning, but the arrests started immediately at dawn. A little later a boy got a bullet in his liver (from a police gun), police motorcyclists pushed into the crowd and the police pulled out their guns several times. It made everyone even more angry."

In this explosive atmosphere, the blockades multiplied: Everything people find on the tracks is removed, they try to "harpoon" power cables, and thousands of small brick "dolmens" are created on the roads. For some, these new types of obstacles would be inspired by a sculpture by contemporary artist Ju Ming, the "Gate of Wisdom" on the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Others, on the other hand, are convinced that this innovation is due to Mong Kok's notorious, plea for disobedience.

This insurgent day ends with the occupation of the CUHK. University students, supported by a number of students and supporters from all over the city, block access to the university and two main roads: the very strategic Tolo Harbour Highway, which connects the New Territories with the Kowloon Peninsula, and a smaller road through this relatively new urbanization region that extends as far as Shenzhen. The next day the police stormed in to free the Tolo Highway. With the support of the population, who organized huge human chains to supply the occupying forces with food and defense equipment, the students put up fierce resistance and managed to defend themselves against the police attack.

To prevent further police action, the CUHK occupiers fortified the campus. Very quickly, however, differences of opinion undermined the movement. Fearing the intrusion of police officers in civilian clothes, CUHK students ask their external supporters to evacuate the campus.

Since the beginning of the anti- ELAB movement in June last year, demonstrators have supported the "Be Water" strategy, inspired by a famous Bruce Lee aphorism. By suddenly seeming to disperse so quickly, the insurgents play with surprise and suppleness against their less mobile opponents. This strategy, however, is limited by the increasingly massive arrests and cooperation between the MTR (Hong Kong Rail Company) and the police. The systematic closure of subway stations before any planned action deprives the demonstrators of their main transport routes throughout the city. The insurgents learn from their failures and return to a strategy of local anchoring that has been neglected since the Umbrella Uprising. It is the "generalized outbreak" (hoi fa): a new war of attrition against the police through the multiplication of uprising centers led by activists who are rooted in their neighborhoods. The time has come for the territorial partisans and once again for the defence of the bastions.

Occupation of Passion

While mobilisation at the CUHK is declining, it is increasing at other universities. Kowloon Polytechnic University has also been active since November 11. The number of occupiers increases after a number of students from other universities have joined. A student at the CUHK, N. explains that he came to PolyU after the expulsion of external reinforcements from his university:

"This conflict has really struck me hard. It weakened us. We should all have fought back together. That's why I came to PolyU: To continue the fight and block the streets."

As in the CUHK, the occupation of PolyU serves as a project to interrupt traffic flows. Overlooking one of the city's busiest streets, the campus provides easy access to the Cross Harbour Tunnel, an underwater tunnel that connects the Wan Chai District on Hong Kong Island with the Hung Hom Station on the Kowloon Peninsula, from where trains travel to mainland China. With an estimated daily traffic volume of 116,000 vehicles, it is the busiest of the three road entrances through Victoria Harbour Strait. Its popularity with motorists is mainly due to the fact that its toll is relatively cheap.

The blockade is organised step by step. On November 13, the occupiers threw traffic cones, construction machinery and city furniture onto the road from a pedestrian bridge connecting the university to the Hung Hom metro station, thus blocking access

to the tunnel. In the following days, the toll station was set on fire and barricades were created on the motorway, which is now closed for traffic and controlled by students.

They also systematically block the various access points to the university: a brick wall is erected on the bridge over the motorway, while barricades are erected at the other road entrances to the campus.

The occupiers are very creative: sometimes volleyball nets or food foils are attached to screen walls, metal barriers are welded and screwed into the floor, while the roadway becomes a giant barricade littered with bricks (some of which are sealed with glue) and breakdown traps. On a loudspeaker, a message runs in a loop, prompting pedestrians to be extremely vigilant as they stroll around the occupied campus. The ground is undermined. A nail is pressed into the sole of one of us for several centimeters. A journalist is less fortunate and hurts himself badly at one of these terribly effective makeshift traps.

The three pedestrian bridges that allow access to or through the campus are secured with pieces of furniture that extend over dozens of meters and are connected to flexible greenhouses. The railings are barricaded with umbrellas to protect against heavy police shells.

The entrance of the university, which has been converted into a bastion, is accessible via the main entrance at Cheong Wan Road. Visitors have to undergo a thorough check at the "immigration" post. As with the CUHK, the students fear the intrusion of plainclothes police officers. The atmosphere at the checkpoint is tense. Masked and black dressed young people, supported by experienced activists wearing helmets and motorcycle armour, meticulously inspect the pockets of every visitor – including journalists. At least in the first days of the occupation a body search must also be carried out, although the severity of these procedures will decrease with time, when all energies have concentrated on the battlefield.

The subdivision of the insurgent forces

The university lobby is full of people. Everybody is busy with his task. Here, food, clothing, protective equipment and medical supplies donated by the population arrive and are sorted before being taken to their storage site. At the beginning of the occupation, most donations were kept in the canteen, before the drastic increase in stocks required distribution of equipment in separate rooms.

The number and appearance of "frontliners" in combat uniforms confirms that the students plan to maintain the occupation in the long term. The archers return to their posts in the garden at the foot of Tower A, overlooking the main entrance around which most of the confrontations with the police take place.

Observers, field glasses in one hand and walkie-talkies in the other, scan the movements of police on the campus as teenage girls hit nails through plastic pipes to create traps. Hundreds of boxes of Molotovs and homemade explosives were stored along the "city walls", ready for transport to the "launch stations" on top of the "citadel" or to the front line.

The fireworks workers usually work in hiding, in one of the few rooms inaccessible to visitors, where various "ingredients for the magic of fire" are stored: Beer bottles, alcohol, sugar, oil, gas cans...

During the first days of the siege, the university swimming pool served as a training ground for "fire magicians" and "frontliners", who specialize in the projection of explosive devices in collisions with the police. In order to protect their university from damage, PolyU students nevertheless ban these practices after a few days, and as one of us visits the swimming pool on the evening of November 16th, a group of occupiers is working to remove the burn marks that have polluted the pool.

A little further away, on Suen Chi Sun Memorial Square, there is a psychological advice centre where social workers welcome students in need or in mental exhaustion. Many young people who participate in the Anti ELAB movement are rejected by their relatives and have had to leave the family home. As L. explains:

"some of my friends in the movement are described by their parents as cockroaches [the offensive term used by pro-Chinese Hong Kongers and police to denigrate demonstrators]. As a result, some of them have left their families in recent months to live in the homes of wealthy supporters. For them, the movement has become their true family."

PolyU's amphitheatre allows you to follow the general news and the front lines in the rest of the city on large screens. Far from conducting an isolated battle, PolyU is in fact at the heart of a broader conflict configuration operating on a city-wide scale. At least at the beginning of the occupation, the steps of the amphitheatre are very thinly occupied: Everyone is too busy with their task to have time to spend in front of the screens.

A staircase leads over the inner courtyard to the Shaw Sports Complex, where a statue of Sun Yat-sen as "Frontliner" towers up. On the right side, the kitchen constantly welcomes a crowd that has come to eat or recharge their mobile phone, possible by using a cable in one of the boxes assigned to the main phone systems. The food is diverse and of excellent quality, and at least at the beginning of the occupation everyone pays attention to sort his waste.

We share our meals with our brothers and sisters in arms or our loved ones. Many couples have come together within the movement and gestures of tenderness are common. We embrace, we hold hands and by no means just lovers. These moments of relaxation are often short-lived. Regularly coordinators rushed between the different lines into the canteen to call

reinforcements to a substation. Even more than elsewhere, it is obvious here that the occupation is experienced as a survival of the status quo.

In the neighbouring rooms there is first of all a wardrobe, in which replacement clothes are stored, which are carefully classified according to size, type and sex. In the same room, bags with sanitary towels confirm, if necessary, the extent of women's participation in this occupation and in the movement in general. Away from the front line, gender parity is respected in most positions. The minority representation of young women in the front line has been a controversial issue since the beginning of the movement. While some women demonstrators have managed to assert their presence on the front line over the months, male "frontliners" maintain protective reflexes by highlighting the vulnerability of their female comrades to sexual violence in the event of arrest.

The residential home is mixed, but there is little sleep, especially after the start of clashes with the police on the night of the 16th to the 17th of November. A sign that these clashes were to be expected is the considerable amount of medical supplies stored in an adjoining room. These medical devices are clearly emergency medical supplies: Saline solution against the irritating effects of tear gas and water cannons, wound pads, disinfectants...

The storage room for cleaning agents is also well equipped. And while the richness of dishwashing liquids shows a particular attention to hygiene, these products can be used twice over as they are sometimes used to prevent police intrusion by spraying floors and stairs.

The unleashed elements

The first clashes between the occupiers and the "popo" [the term used by the Hong Kong insurgents to designate the police] occurred on November 17 at midnight. A group of riot police are trying to approach the university via Chatham Road, the main road west of the campus. Alarmed by the guards, a group of about a hundred well-equipped front liners set out to defend the campus. At the forefront, it is the mission of the fire wizards to ignite a flame barrier with Molotovs and homemade bombs to prevent the police from advancing. They are protected by "tun bing" shields, swinging cabinet doors, sometimes reinforced with foam to absorb shocks, swimming boards, auto body boards or round polycarbonate shields.

The "firefighters" (with for dui) are responsible for extinguishing the tear gas canisters, mainly with the help of isothermal bags filled with water. While the traffic cones used by the Hong Kong "frontliners" have attained an iconic status and are used worldwide today, they are being used less and less here. L. is familiar with disposing teargas and explains:

"Personally, I don't like to use them very often. First, because the tips of the cones are not always pierced. Then the base of the cone covers a too large area, which affects the accuracy when filling in water. But it also depends on the environment. For example, if they (the cops) are on a bridge, all you have to do is throw the tear gas container."

Tennis rackets, badminton rackets and, to a lesser extent, hockey sticks (or lacrosse rackets, a sport played mainly by young people from good situated families) are still very popular.

The "magic of fire" is closely related to the magic of the wind. As L. explains:

"You have to know the wind direction. Sometimes you don't even need a gas mask. Maybe you don't even have to move."

In certain decisive phases of the battle, the insurgents thus profit from the breeze. On Sunday November 17, for instance, the wind blows in their favour and sends the tear gas smoke back to the police.

Other, more marginal forms of "magic" have emerged in recent months or are still under investigation. These include "poison magic" (in preparation) and "insect magic" (exposure of boxes full of cockroaches by police officers or in shops hostile to the movement). Online games, manga and Japanese anime are an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the (sometimes very) young Hong Kong insurgents.

The "Frontliners" have invented their own mythology, at the crossroads of Final Fantasy and the "language games" that the Hong Kong people love so much. One of these mythical creatures, reminiscent of the magical animals of video games, appeared after the pro-Chinese attacks on the followers of the movement. The term si liu refers to retaliation against these aggressors and literally means "to regulate his affairs privately". However, a joker has chosen to play with the second possible meaning of the term, which may also mean "lion bird". All that was needed was for the movement's graphic artists to give shape to this legendary animal.

The "magic of light" also plays an important role in clashes with the police. When a new battle broke out in the PolyU on the night of the 16th to the 17th of November, the fighters stationed on the balconies of the university aimed their lasers at the police to dazzle them. The first Molotovs fly. The archers and catapults on PolyU's terraces are activated. In response, the tear gas rains on the young people, who soon retreat. The same scenario is repeated several times until the police finally retreats. One hour later they will test the other line of defense of the "Frontliners" at the Science Museum Road, which is protected by an umbrella wall. Again the Molotovs rain and the cops retreat. They have probably never really tried to break through the insurgents' lines of defense, but rather tested them.

Around three o'clock in the morning the tension eased and everyone went "home" to rest. Sunday morning, around nine o'clock, the police are back. The police first instruct the demonstrators verbally to disperse. Then they wave the blue flag: "You are taking part in an illegal demonstration. You risk arrest. A few minutes later it was the turn of the black flag: "Attention, tear gas". Almost at the same time, the orange flag blows in the wind: "Disperse or we shoot". This is the beginning of a fierce battle.

Around 10 a.m. two water cannons, accompanied by armoured vehicles, reached the campus via Austin Road and Chatham Road. At the intersection of the two avenues, they stopped for a few minutes before launching a grouped attack. In shock, the demonstrators retreated about fifty meters. The siege of the university has only just begun. But to the surprise of the cops, the two or three hundred "frontliners" on the street and on the balconies manage to defend themselves against the vehicles. The Molotovs made a decisive contribution to the success of this reaction. The persistence of the fighters and the bricks scattered over the roadway, which considerably disturb the manoeuvring of the vehicles, do the rest. One of the armoured vehicles tried to deploy its sound cannon, but with little success: under the rain of bricks and various projectiles falling on it, the police preferred to retract it.

The fights go on all afternoon. With nightfall the police attacks become more and more aggressive. They are likely to be ordered to end the occupation before the end of the weekend so that the government can claim to have restored order and traffic flows again before the reopening of the offices. Police officers gathered in the corridors of Hung Hom metro station and on the bridges to the university. Around 7:30 p.m. they tried to break through from the A1 pedestrian bridge, but the occupiers managed to push them back by triggering a gigantic inferno that collapsed part of the roof of the pedestrian bridge. An hour later it was time for the lower floor of the toll bridge to catch fire. A pedestrian bridge connecting the toll bridge with Tsim Sha Tsui East was also set on fire to block police access.

The most spectacular incident during the siege occurred around 9 pm. Two armoured police vehicles try to penetrate the line of defence of the occupying forces on the toll bridge. One of them approaches the wall erected by the occupants and fires water at the "Frontliner" from the roof of the vehicle. The second vehicle approached and collected a Molotov in the middle of the windshield, then a dozen others on the roof and the rest of the car bodywork. When the vehicle was wrapped in flames and turned around, the "Frontliners" cheered and shouted: "Free Hong Kong!"

When the bridges burned and blocked the police operation, a water cannon multiplied the attacks on the side of the junction Chatham Road and Austin Road. After the failure of the intruders from the bridges and pedestrian bridges east of the campus, the fighting focused on this crossing. Until the early hours of the morning, the same ritual is repeated at regular intervals: Every 15 minutes the water cannon starts at full speed, in combination with the screaming siren noise, in the direction of the hundred or so "frontliners" who defend themselves fiercely. They cling to their umbrellas and improvised shields and against the floods, mixed with the feared blue pepper solution that has become the hallmark of Hong Kong riot police.

Since we were both "smurfed" ourselves, we can both testify of the severe burns caused by the fluid in question. On June 17th, groups of volunteers were active in the campus lobby to shower, wash and cover the unfortunate "Smurfs" with Aloe Vera. I forgot my shame and had to show myself in front of everyone in my underwear. Not that the moderators paid much attention to these exhibitions: Apart from the fact that the victims "multiplied" during the day, the occupiers had other things to do than to flush their eyes.

Changing clothes after these repeated showers – which often only reduce burns – was a measure of the competence of the young people responsible for these operations. After a brief look, the volunteers presented a T-shirt or jeans perfectly tailored to the size and body – a skill that suggests their membership of the famous PolyU Fashion School, a university known for its technical skills in fashion, hotel and mechanical engineering.

As the battle intensifies, this comfort is a distant memory. The panic begins to spread among the students, especially among the youngest – there are hundreds of minors among the occupiers who are visibly affected by police exhaustion and intimidation. Shortly before 10 pm, the police announced on Facebook that all the people living on the campus would now be considered "rioters" – a crime that can be punished with ten years imprisonment.

Some demonstrators already panicked after news circulated on telegram suggesting that occupiers trying to flee the campus had been arrested and that journalists and doctors had been searched and interrogated, in some cases without further ado. During the night, this fear only increases. Outside, the "frontliners" heroically oppose the police vehicles. With each new attack, the group closed the ranks, while a handful of "brave people" escaped to launch side attacks against the armored vehicles and water cannons, supported by the tower's catapults. These are sometimes of tremendous precision and reach the front of the vehicles at a distance of fifty meters.

With the water weapon the police now plays the strategy of exhaustion – of body and fire. The three of us who take part in the fighting alongside the "frontliners" hear how the fighters encourage each other to save their ammunition. "Stop the magic of fire, throw stones!" the youths shouted. The police officers may have felt that their opponents were losing their fighting spirit and used the opportunity to try a breakthrough. Guards stationed on buildings overlooking the campus spray tear gas and rubber bullets on the "Frontliner" and their supporters on the PolyU balconies. And when the "Frontliners" began to retreat, about 40 policemen tried to enter the university.

It's 5:30 in the morning and the situation seems to be changing. But once again, the magic of fire decides something else. The attempt of the police officers to attack encountered a gigantic flame barrier. One of us, who is present in the university lobby, sees the occupiers rushing to the Molotov boxes, which are still abundant. Without hesitation, about a hundred of them threw burning bottles without interruption. For those of us who have remained outside, this is a time of pure terror. Within the group of journalists accompanying us, the hypothesis of a fire triggered by tear gas bombardment triggers a wave of panic. One of us is in shock, convinced that a bloodbath awaits us behind the flames. Another tries to mobilize the group by arguing that it is important to testify at all costs when there are victims.

We will all eventually return home after overcoming the concern for what we would find inside. Some are ready to experience a massacre, others think of the comrades left inside who may need help. When the flames finally slowdown, an apocalyptic spectacle is offered to us in the devastated hall. Through the last fireplaces and charred furniture we get into the lobby, not really prepared for what we will find there...

Despite all the resistance, nobody was hurt. Given the violence of the police intervention and the intensity of the reaction of the occupying forces, this is a miracle. As an important election period (the local elections) approached, the Hong Kong executive clearly played the card of restraint. The threats with live ammunition that frightened many of the occupants were not carried out and no serious injuries were reported during the siege. However, the situation could have turned into a massacre, in particular through the intervention of special police units equipped with assault rifles during the last offensive against the students. For their part, despite their apparent virulence, the insurgents did not try to kill police officers. A policeman was hit by an arrow in his calf, but he is the only reported victim on the police side.

The sun rises on a devastated world. The fighters, exhausted, fall to the ground or sleep standing up. Some couples hug each other. Frightened teenagers dress "civil" and hope to escape. A fighter determined to resist until the end mocks them and mocks their lack of determination. But the boys decided that in the end they were not ready to die here. For the time being, these frightened youths seem to have no idea where the wind will take them.

(1) There are persistent rumours about demonstrators who have "disappeared", but so far no case has been verified.

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